

# Memoirs from the House of the Dead

## Character Sketches

*by Hannah Pfeifle*

### Selected Quotes

**Alexander Petrovich-** The author of the Memoirs and the narrator through the majority of the novel. A nobleman exiled to ten years in Siberia as a Second Class convict for murdering his wife, he provides a somewhat subjective view on all aspects of prison life, concentrating on discerning the nature of his fellow prisoners, as well as the nature of their collective punishments. Through his observations, he comes to the conclusion that there exists an inequality of punishment and he seeks some resolution to the question of how to reform it. Alexander Petrovich also struggles with his position as a nobleman in the prison coming into contact with the common people for the first time.

The initial narrator, who provides the reader with Alexander Petrovich's notebooks, suggests the nobleman's reliability by describing his post-prison behavior as morally irreproachable and quiet. Alexander Petrovich's experience in prison itself appears to be submissive and passive, he is attracted to honest and pretty people, and he expresses an intense curiosity in his fellow inmates.

**Akim Akimovich-** One of the four other Russian noblemen in the prison. He is Alexander Petrovich's neighbor in the barracks and teaches him about life in prison upon his arrival. Akim is extremely well behaved, exceedingly simple, honest, just and skillful. In the beginning, Alexander Petrovich dislikes him for being so simple and limited, but respects him in the end. Akim offers solace as the only other respectable Russian gentleman. He does not live by his own intelligence, but must fulfill his duties and live by another man's rule. Akim represents the exception to the prisoner because he is indifferent. He has settled in the prison as if he will spend the rest of his life there, while the other prisoners act as though they are only passing through, even if they have been convicted for 20 years. Freedom or prison life is all the same to Akim Akimovich.

### Part I

**Aristov-** Another of the four Russian noblemen. Aristov is purely physical, totally corrupt, immoral, and loathsome. He informs on his fellow inmates to the Major and his character taints Alexander Petrovich's first days in prison because he judges everyone else by Aristov's vile nature. Therefore Aristov comes to show that nobility doesn't necessarily make one man better than another. He teaches Alexander Petrovich that men of the common people are capable of being extraordinary people. At the end of the novel, Aristov attempts to run away from the prison with another convict, Kulikov, but they are unsuccessful.

### Part II

**Sushilov-** A meek and submissive convict that cannot live by his own rule, but must live his life as a servant. He immediately attaches himself to Alexander Petrovich and becomes his personal slave. It turns out he does not do this for money, but because he needs to serve. Sushilov is pitiful, downtrodden and nondescript, but he is always there. Incapable of conversation, he merely seeks Alexander Petrovich's attention and gratification. He is also significant because he originally had a less severe punishment, but he landed in Siberia with an extended sentence by switching places with a more serious convict for too small a price.

**Aley-** Alexander Petrovich's other neighbor in the barracks. The youngest brother of the three Daghestanian Tartars in the prison, Aley receives much love and attention, for he is also beautiful in both face and soul. The young boy has a gentle, nave nature and throughout his four-year sentence he remains uncorrupted and chaste. He helps

Alexander Petrovich with his work, while Alexander Petrovich teaches Aley to read and write Russian. They become very attached to each other and love each other like brothers.

**Petrov-** Seeks out and befriends Alexander Petrovich. He lives in another barracks as a member of the Special Class, and while they are acquaintances for the length of Alexander Petrovich's term, they never grow closer or become intimate. He is sort of an enigma for Alexander Petrovich. He mysteriously helps the nobleman through the hellish bath scene. His attitude is always polite and refined, yet he is rumored to have performed a hideous crime. No one doubts that he is the most desperate man in the prison. It is also mysterious why he remains in prison, for is he had the desire to escape, he would surely do so. Other prisoners fear Petrov and are horrified by him. At one time he planned to kill the Major.

**Isaiah Fomich-** Significant for being the only Jew in the prison. A friend of Alexander Petrovich's who made life in prison easier for him. Isaiah Fomich is a rich jeweler and pawnbroker protected by the Jewish people in town, as well as by the prisoners for being the only Jew in the prison. Serves as form of entertainment. Everyone is fond of him, even though everyone is also in debt to him. Steams himself to insensibility in the hellish bath scene.

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**Miretsky-** A Pole and one of the eight non-Russian noblemen in the prison. Denounced by Aristov and thus in poor favor with the Major. Alexander Petrovich respects him, but can never get attached to him because he is morally ill. Prison life is harder on him than the regular nobleman because he is foreign. Eventually his mother's petition is granted and he is released from prison.

**The Major-** Rules the prison with a strict and violent hand. An extremely unjust man, feared and hated by the prisoners, he regulates with unlimited power. The Major is in office for the majority of Alexander Petrovich's term in prison, but at the end of the novel, he is finally forced to resign after being court-martialed.